

Summit provides one-stop environment for women parolees



Steve Matzker, The Southern

VeEssie Brinson (left) and Jacquie Betz laugh Tuesday during a mock interview at the 'A Summit of Hope' event in Carbondale.

August 13, 2014 MOLLY PARKER THE SOUTHERN

Amy Nowakowski of Marion had it all: House. Kids. Husband. Great job.

Then, after a divorce and during a “vulnerable moment,” she got involved with the “wrong man.”

He was selling and using drugs and she did, too.

Before age 30, though, she was not a smoker, drinker or drug user.

“From the first time I picked up to the time I ended up in prison was less than a year,” she said, noting that heroin was her drug of choice. “Of course, I lost everything in that process.”

(Story continued next page)

Nowakowski said she hopes her story inspires others to stay or get off drugs before it's too late. She was one of the speakers Tuesday at an event called "A Summit of Hope," which was a joint effort of District 5 Parole Office, Jackson County Health Department and Treatment Alternatives for a Safe Community.

"It doesn't get easier," she said. "You just learn better ways to cope."

She was released from prison in October 2012 after serving a collective four years.

Addiction doesn't discriminate, she said, emphasizing that it's important the choices you make.

"It can happen to anybody at any time and it only takes one time," she said.

The event was designed to be a one-stop environment for local female parolees to obtain the necessary assistance to move past barriers that may be preventing them from leading a successful life.

The program was developed in Southern Illinois and has been replicated throughout the state.

Marcus King, senior community outreach administrator for the Illinois Department of Corrections, said the goal is to help these women "reintegrate into society."

Just for the average person, he said, it can be difficult to obtain a driver's license and health insurance.

"Imagine how hard it is for someone coming out of a long stint of incarceration to do that," he said.

Services offered at the event included help with obtaining state identification, counseling, transportation, food, clothing, shelter, child support services, primary health care referrals, screening for blood pressure, vision, HIV testing, among other things.

It was also a chance for the women to learn from and gain strength from each other.

VeEssie Brinson of Carbondale was one of those inspirational voices among the sea of women at Tuesday's event.

"This is a new journey for me," she said. "It was the worst at first but now it's flipping over for the better."

(Story continued next page)

Brinson was released in January after serving five years in prison for a weapons related conviction. When she got out, she spent five months homeless, staying on friend's couches and wherever else she could find a place to sleep. She eventually reached out for help and has found housing.

"It's amazing how God picked me up," she said.

The event she said offered more than she could have imagined to move her forward.

"I'm shocked and I'm impressed and I'm thankful," she said.